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ABSTRACT

The role of outdoor education activities in the Kanda University English language institute is described. The outdoor program was developed to unite faculty and students interested in recreational activities and provide an opportunity to explore common interests in nature, sports, and language learning. The activities develop self-esteem, leadership, trust, and interpersonal skills, with language used as the tool to describe and interpret experience. Students use kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal forms of intelligence. Negotiation of activities enhances the student-centered nature of the program's design. The learning sequence in such an experiential program, and theories modeling it, is discussed. Contains 16 references. (MSE)

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Classrooms in the Wild

Learning Language and Life Skills in the KUIS Outdoor Sports Circle

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Adrian Wurr

One of the goals of Kanda University that I most admire is the attempt to seek and create real life learning opportunities for students both on and off campus. The ELI attempts to create a relaxed and casual atmosphere for students to converse with each other and teachers in an English speaking environment. In our classrooms, too, students learn that language is not a static set of symbols confined to four walls and a 90 minute classes. Rather language is part of culture and therefore can be nurtured at home, school, work, and play. This is the philosophy which led to the creation of the Kanda Outdoor Sports Circle *Sometimes*.

Now in its second year and with more than 50 members, the *Sometimes* Outdoor Sports Circle was created to unite students and faculty interested in outdoor recreation and provide them with an opportunity to explore their common interests in nature, sports, and language learning. In this paper I shall consider some aspects in the approach and design of the club's curriculum to show the beneficial effects club activities can have on learning language and life skills.

To some the connection between outdoor sports and language learning may not be immediately apparent. Yet Outdoor Education has been used by academic and

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private organizations to provide students with hand on learning in a variety of skills including language and learning how to learn skills since the turn of the century[1]. Outdoor Education activities may be as varied as the environment and imagination allow, but often include such activities as nature walks, orienteering, New Games[2], and ropes courses[3]. The purposes of these activities are to develop the participants' self-esteem, leadership, inter- and intrapersonal skills, all of which, it shall be argued here, have a beneficial carry over effect on language learning and personal growth. The theory behind many of the club activities is rooted in experiential, or "hand on" learning. Kohonen (Working Papers, 1) traces the roots of experiential education to John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget, George Kelly, Abraham Maslow, and Carl Rogers, all of whom were prominent psychologists with an interest in education. "Common to all is an emphasis on development toward a purposeful life and self-direction as the organizing principle of education." (Kohonen, 1)

Experiential education adopts both a functional and interactional view of language. Language is seen as the tool used to describe and interpret experience, which in turn forms the basis of the perception of reality. This "personal construct" of reality, as Kelly (1955) calls it, is never absolute but rather subject to modification through a process of negotiation with others. Thus, a primary purpose of language is to serve "as a vehicle for the realization of interpersonal relations" (Richards & Rodgers, 17) by which the sense of reality is maintained. The

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[1]Academic programs date back to 1935, when Dartmouth University introduced a wilderness program to reduce attrition and introduce students to the school setting (Gass, 1983:2) while private organizations such as The Boy Scouts and Outward Bound have been in existence slightly longer.
[2]New Games are cooperative, noncompetitive sports.
[3]Ropes courses "provide participants with a series of outdoor physical challenges including climbing, balancing, jumping, and physical problem solving" (Braverman, 1990:25).

interactional component of the *Sometimes* club activities thus emphasizes the performance of social interactions both at school and on nature excursions.

The desire to make new friends is the leading reason why students join any club. Yet the students soon discover that the *Sometimes* club is not just any club, but one in which they must draw upon their social and linguistic resources to complete the task at hand. Before students do a trust fall[4], they need to know some basic vocabulary and commands they can use to communicate their needs to the people responsible for catching them. Likewise, part of preparing for a weekend camping trip, then, is concerned with providing students with the linguistic and operational skills necessary for successful completion of the event. These might include elements of grammar and lexicon as well as information on equipment and nature conservation.

Club activities also foster an integrative approach to language learning, utilizing at least three other forms of intelligence besides those traditionally recognized in the Western world: kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal (de Tagle, 1988). Kinesthetic intelligence focuses using the body and movement to aid learning and has obvious applications in a sports circle. Interpersonal intelligence is demonstrated through teamwork and attitudes towards others and is based upon the basic human need for group belongingness and acceptance, whereas intrapersonal intelligence is the capacity to understand and integrate emotions and feelings with experience. Intrapersonal and interpersonal processes are interrelated affective factors influencing a student's motivation and attitude towards language learning. Different people have different orientations to learning a

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[4]an activity where a student stands on a tree stump or other raised platform and falls backwards into the arms of a prepared group of "spotters" or people catchers.

language; thus, a basic premise of language learning theory and *Sometimes* club activities is that language acquisition and retention will be increased by utilizing different modes of learning in the presentation of materials.

Basic to the idea of experiential learning and outdoor education is that of personal growth. Developing self-confidence and self-esteem are important steps towards viewing the self positively as a language learner (Oxford, 1990).

> Learners with high self-esteem are less likely to feel threatened. Confident persons have the advantage of not fearing unfamiliar situations or rejection...(Kohonen, 13).

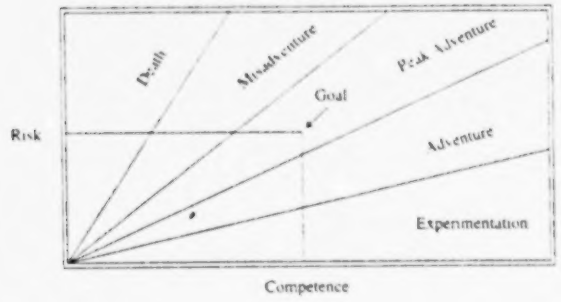
Zook (1986) cites research that has shown outdoor education programs "successful in improving the self-esteem levels of their participants." Thus, it is hoped that club activities could serve in the development of a positive self image both as a person and as a language learner.

Another objective related to personal growth is that of challenge and extending the self beyond preconceived level of ability (Green, 1992). If students are able to extend themselves beyond what they previously believed possible in one skill area, then it seems likely the resulting increase in self-confidence will carry over to other areas as well. Rebecca Oxford has stated that "Successful language learning necessitates overcoming inhibitions and learning to take reasonable risks" (1990:142). Outdoor adventure activities can serve this purpose as they typically introduce 'intentional stress' by "presenting challenges for students to meet by drawing upon individual, group, and natural resources..." (Zook: 28). Activities such as a "Mohawk Walk," where pairs of students walk atop logs set in a "V" pattern using each other for collective balance and support or white water rafting have, not

surprisingly, been shown to increase the participant's level of anxiety (Fretz, 1989). But anxiety is not necessarily a bad thing. Facilitating anxiety has been shown to increase athletic (Sonstroem & Bernardo) and linguistic (Kleinmann, 1977) performance.

Davies graphically illustrates in figure 1 the relationship between risk (anxiety) and competence as it applies to outdoor experiential language learning.

Figure 1: Davies' (1989) Risk vs. Competence Relationship



As in the findings reported by Sonstroem and Bernardo, performance is shown to increase with the level of perceived risk up to a certain point and then competency levels drop dramatically. This critical turning point occurs during the "Peak Adventure" or "Experience Stage" and is instrumental in discovering real and imagined limits to ability, a process helpful in shaping learner attitudes. The proverb "nothing ventured (risked), nothing gained" applies to language learning as well. Obviously, there will always be situations where the student's linguistic skills are not sufficient for the task at hand. But with a positive attitude, learners can compensate for their linguistic limitations by searching for creative solutions to overcome them. They will gain the benefit of

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experience in the process. The adventure experience cans serve as a means to achieving this goal.

Other club objectives include developing leadership, trusting others, and creating a cooperative, noncompetitive environment where students feel free to develop and express their individual personalities. These objectives not only reinforce inter- and intrapersonal communication skills, such as active listening and giving positive feedback within a group, but also help create a strong bonds and sense of belongingness amongst members of the group. The need for a sense of belongingness is part of human nature and one that is particularly emphasized in Asian cultures. My experience in the *Sometimes* club suggests Japanese students are not exception to this either, as the 50+ members operate almost as an extended family.

> As students interpret and clarify their own and others' experiences they become involved in the process of trying to find appropriate words and phrases. In the search for these words and phrases, students find that the thoughts they are searching for reveal themselves....These words and phrases develop as a result of sharing experience and trying to learn from it. The search for language begins with the search for meaning itself. (Davies, 1989:33-34)

Several models have been advanced attempting to illustrate the learning sequence in an experiential education program such as the Sometimes Outdoor Sports Circle. (See figures 2 and 3). Common to all is a four-stage cyclical process outlining the experiential learning sequence. Kolb (1984, 42) labels these stages "Concrete Experience," "Reflective Observation," "Abstract Conceptualization," and "Active Experimentation." "Concrete Experience" involves personal experience, trying or doing something. "Reflective Observation" is a structured review period in which the student focuses on the thoughts, feelings, and

actions he or she had during the experience and makes tentative conclusions about what can be learned from this.

Figure 2: Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning

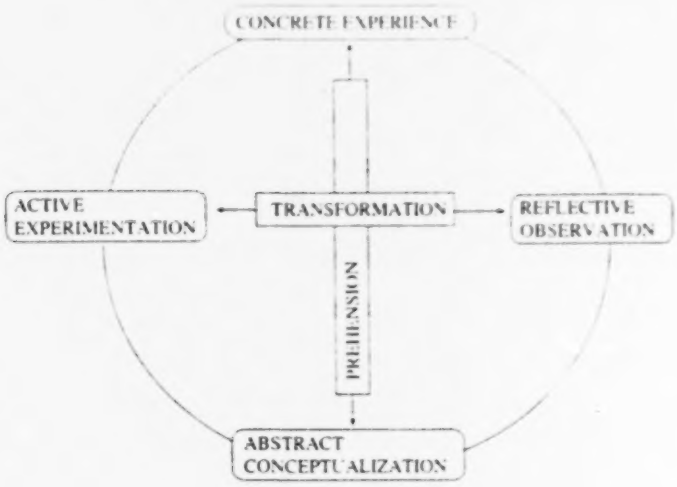
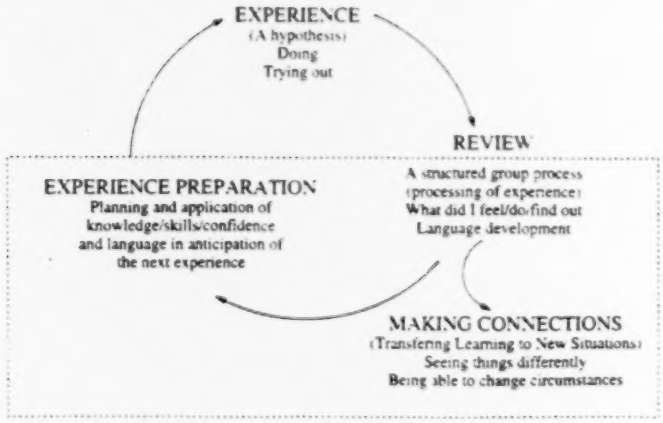


Figure 3: Davies' (1989) model of the experiential learning sequence



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"Abstract Conceptualization," called "Experience Preparation" in Davies' model[5] (figure 3) is a systematic approach to a learning experience drawing heavily on one's schema to apply past knowledge and experiences to future events. "Active Experimentation" is the stage in which students test and apply what they have learned in the other stages to new situations. This involves risk taking in order to get things done (i.e.: influencing people and changing situations). Personal experience is the basis for learning, but in order to gain from an experience, one must consciously reflect on the event in an attempt to learn from it.

Unique to Kolb's model is the inclusion of two diametrically opposed forces in learning: the "prehension" and "transformation" dimensions. Briefly, the prehension dimension is the line along which experience and conceptualization occur, governing how one gathers informational input, and the transformational dimension refers to what one does with the input received. This includes active experimentation at one end of the spectrum and reflective observation at the other.

The four stage cyclical learning sequence described above is the basis upon which the Sometimes curriculum is organized. However, it must be said that the students in the club, just like most students in a classroom, are largely unaware of the educational theories underpinning the club. The club is student-centered and largely student run. I believe this is as it should be since this necessitates the students taking an active role in shaping the curriculum and accepting responsibility for their actions. Occasionally my hidden educational agenda at times differs

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[5]Currently used in an EFL outdoor education program at the Bell school in Bath, Wales. For another example of Davies' model applied to experiential learning, please see the article *'Dear Brown Eyes': Experiential Learning in a project-oriented approach* by a colleague of Davies' at the Bell school, Graham Carter, and Howard Thomas in Currents of Change in English Language Teaching, Oxford University Press, 1990.

from each individual student's idea of fun, and then there is often a fair amount of negotiation between the students and I to devise activities and experiences which meet everyone's needs. But this is the nature of a student-centered curriculum.

As Kohonen points out, this type of student-centered curriculum "involves a basic trust in the learner's will and ability to cope with these tasks, and a respect for his person and his choices" (1989:12). In addition to having students choose, plan, and organize the club activities, I have reinforced this notion of choice at times by having students publicly announce "I choose to do this" before initiating a trust fall or a mountain peak climb to reinforce the concept of learner responsibility. This makes the students feel that they are in charge of situation, not the teacher. The intrinsic motivation to participate in, and gain from, the experience fully was therefore heightened.

Davies describes the teacher's role during activities such as this which characterize the "Experience" stage of the experiential learning sequence as three-fold: "developing the opportunities for personal challenge within the task (and encouraging students to do the same); giving emphasis to the particular process or ability they intend to develop; and controlling the levels of risk" (1989:12-13). The teacher or club advisor is best seen by the students as part of the group, a collaborator, and occasionally, a facilitator, as this allows all to escape the inherently unequal positions of power that exist between teachers and students in a traditional classroom setting. While never taking the spotlight, the teacher is always in the background shaping the learning experience to promote the desired outcomes. The art of a negotiated club curriculum, then, centers on the students providing the input and the teacher providing learning opportunities that will meet both the student's and the club's goals.

The activities are seen by the student as real, meaningful, and fun no doubt in part because they are of their own choosing. The students have a real sense of excitement and need to share what they thought, felt, and experienced with others. It's easy to capitalize on this energy by "unobtrusively enquiring into areas of shared experience" (p. 22) in order to lead the students towards discoveries that will be useful to them in future activities and experiences. This helps students synthesize what they have learned and apply this information to different situations, not only in future club activities, but also to personal, academic, and professional goals they have. In this way, the review or reflective observation inherent within the conversations that naturally evolve around a campfire or during the train ride home leads to what is alternately called "Active Experimentation" by Kolb or "Making Connections" by Davies.

Unfortunately, the educational value of outdoor adventure seems to be lost on many in academia. There is a notable lack of articles on the topic in leading educastional journals and an apparent bias amongst educational policy makers that outdoor adventure activities are merely "fun and games," that serious learning can only occur in the classroom (Bennis, 1984). Yet the Duke of Edinburgh awards in England and the Bell school in Bath, have helped establish a precedent for using outdoor recreational activities within an educational setting.

Although the *Sometimes* Outdoor Circle is still young as a club, I blieve the tremondous growth and success we have enjoed in our first two years together certainly shows the students' enthusiasm for this type of experientially-based, outdoor adventure learning program. The range of activities that could be undertaken in the future is vast, given the abundance of areas of natural scenic beauty in Japan. However, at

present we are somewhat limited by the resources available (such as funding, equipment, and qualified guides to ensure safety).

As enthusiastic as I am about the prospects for real and meaningful language and life skill learning to take place within the *Sometimes* Outdoor Sports Circle, I do not recommend the use of adventure experiences for all language learners. The range of possible ages and learning levels of students who would benefit most from an outdoor adventure second or foreign language learning program is limited. For example, Braverman notes that "the impact (of ropes course participation) was more uniformly positive on older youth." The program Davies describes at the Bell school is limited to students over the age of 17. Likewise, many of the courses offered by Outward Bound and the National Outdoor Leadership School have minimum age requirements. This suggests that outdoor adventure courses are better suited to the needs of adult language learners such as those enrolled in tertiary or adult education programs.

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